



Santangelo F.

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***Transactions of the American Philological Association* 2016, 146(2), 349-376.**

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DOI link to article:

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Federico Santangelo

TAPA, Volume 146, Number 2, Autumn 2016, pp. 349-376 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Enduring Arguments: Priestly Expertise in the Early Principate*

FEDERICO SANTANGELO

Newcastle University

SUMMARY: One of the key aspects of the Augustan settlement, and more generally of the early Principate, was the firm control of the *princeps* over public religion, including the main priestly colleges. This paper sets out to consider several related problems: what place—if any—did the expertise that priests deployed in the performance of their duties have in that period? How did emperors engage with it? What impact did it have on the workings of the Senate? How can these issues shed light on the interplay between politics and religion at a time of profound historical change?

1. INTRODUCTION: POOLS OF KNOWLEDGE

IT HARDLY NEEDS STATING, NOT LEAST BECAUSE A BIMILLENARY RECENTLY DREW to a close, that an essential feature of the Augustan settlement was a major reorganization of public religion, and ultimately a new configuration of the relationship between religion and power. Priesthoods played an important role in that setup. The *princeps* made it memorably clear in the passage of the *Res gestae* (7.2) where he meticulously listed the priestly offices that he had taken up during his lifetime. Such accumulation completed a process initiated by Julius Caesar, who had been *pontifex maximus*, augur, *quindecimvir s.f.*, and probably *salius*, and is in itself a powerful symptom of the fact that the position of the *princeps* was incommensurable to that of any of his contemporaries, and that Roman public religion was in new, largely uncharted

* Aspects of the argument of this paper were presented in Oxford and Erfurt in November 2014 and January 2015 respectively, and I greatly benefited from the questions and reactions of the audiences on both occasions. I am very grateful to Nicholas Purcell and Jörg Rüpke for illuminating discussion, and to my late colleague John Moles and two anonymous referees for invaluable comments on drafts of this piece.

territory.¹ The *princeps* chose the route of holding a number of priesthoods rather than that of enhancing the prerogatives of an individual priesthood, such as the highest pontificate.² Within the space of a generation or so, accumulation of priestly offices became frequent across the senatorial order.³ The wide distribution of religious expertise across the senatorial order was one of the distinctive features of Roman public religion in the Republican period, and was not fundamentally altered under the Principate.⁴ Augustus's strategy did not just involve taking up a number of priesthoods, some of which had until then been rather marginal. It was also about sitting on a number of priestly colleges, on the one hand asserting his control over their decisions by sharing their membership with individuals of incommensurably lesser distinction and power, and, on the other, standing out precisely because of his decision to be on them. Control over priestly colleges has often been regarded as a crucial feature of the wider grip of the monarch over public religion, and indeed of his effort to promote an ambitious revival. Prosopographical work on the priestly colleges in this period has shown how a number of close associates of the *princeps* were members of key priestly colleges, usually along with Augustus himself, and their presence has rightly been regarded as a symptom of the *princeps*'s firm control over public religion.⁵

A recent discussion even goes as far as speaking of the religious action of the "party" of Augustus in Rome and Italy (Rey 2013). The use of such terminology is hardly helpful, even between scare quotes, but the point on which the analysis developed by S. Rey rests is important and timely: it would be reductive to envisage the Augustan resettlement of public religion as a narrowly top-down operation, centered around an individual. The *princeps* promoted a circuit of euergetic action that affected major religious infrastructures and required the response of some of the members of his closer circle. Suetonius (*Aug.* 29.7–8) provides a list of the public works that Augustus's

¹ Gordon 1990a: 182–83; Stepper 2003: 25–39; Rüpke 2005: 1601–2 (= 2008: 57–58) and 2011b: 205–6 (= 2014: 234–35). On Caesar's priesthoods see Rüpke 2005: 1057–59, no. 2003 (= 2008: 734–35, no. 2003), who accepts Crawford's suggestion that Caesar was also a *salus* (1974: 735; cf. *RRC* 452/3).

² Rüpke 2011a: 36–37. A different emphasis in Stepper 1999: 172 and 2003: 108–12, 128–30, 134, 258, who stresses the weight of the emperor within the pontifical college and the "führende Stellung" of the highest pontificate in Roman public religion.

³ Hoffman Lewis 1955: 22–23; Scheid 1978: 629; Gordon 1990b: 220–21. On the *amplissima collegia*, cf. the important qualifications in Rüpke 2005: 1607 (= 2008: 60) and 2011b: 210 (= 2014: 239).

⁴ Moatti 2003 remains essential reading on the role of specialist expertise in late Republican culture; Berthelet 2011 discusses Republican priests in a similar vein.

⁵ Scheid 1978: 636–37 and 2005: 180–81.

associates carried out under the direct encouragement of the *princeps*, including a number of religious buildings: the temples of Hercules Musarum, of Diana, and of Saturn.

Their involvement did not just require making material resources available: it was also about the deployment of specific religious expertise. L. Munatius Plancus, for instance, did not just take charge of the dedication of the temple of Saturn, but also played a crucial role in shaping the process leading to the bestowal upon Octavian of the name *Augustus* instead of the one that had initially been envisaged, *Romulus*.⁶ Suetonius (*Aug.* 7.2) records the argument that Plancus put forward in the Senate, in which the connection between the proposed name and augury was fully spelled out.⁷ Plancus's point was backed by his distinguished and valuable political status—that of a *consularis* who had switched sides from Antony to Octavian not long before the beginning of the Civil War; in light of that background he could fairly claim a degree of competence in religious matters.⁸ However, the knowledge that he offered to the debate was not of a priestly kind. He had no connection with the augural college, and his only recorded priesthood is the post of *septemuir epulonum*.⁹

We need not postulate that all the actions of Plancus and of Augustus's associates on religious matters were closely managed by the *princeps*; in fact, we can, and no doubt should, allow a margin of free and independent initiative on the part of the individuals involved. In an important passage of *Rituals and Power*, Simon Price pointed out that the initiative of individual priests could have a significant role in the elaboration and development of the imperial cult (1984: 63). Analogies between the developments in the cities of the province of Asia and those in the city of Rome should be pursued with a considerable degree of caution, but it is worth entertaining the possibility that the individual members of the priestly colleges in Rome—and more widely of the senatorial elite—still had margins to bring about a measure of change and innovation in various aspects of public religion.

The Roman Senate was a repository of religious knowledge, which was certainly not the exclusive prerogative of the senators who were members of a priestly college. It was a venue in which matters concerning the running of public religion were frequently dealt with and debated, and individual members were expected to fulfil a number of important religious duties, especially during the tenure of the senior magistracies, or indeed during a provincial command or on a diplomatic mission (Scheid 2005b). A distinctive contri-

⁶ Evidence and discussion in Todisco 2007 and Berthelet 2015: 285–312.

⁷ Cf. Vell. Pat. 2.91.1. See Wardle 2014: 103–8.

⁸ Syme 1939: 281, 411; Osgood 2006: 277–80.

⁹ Rüpke 2005: 1162 no. 2248 (= 2008: 770 no. 2248).

bution to the running of public religion could be a crucial asset in asserting and enhancing the political and social profile of an individual. The adhesion to the Augustan discourse was a very complex dynamic, which left scope for a wide range of approaches. The dedication of the Pantheon by Agrippa is another instructive case in point. It was accompanied by an attempt to take a new foray into the domain of ruler cult: Agrippa proposed to install a statue of Augustus within the temple; when the *princeps* turned that honor down, he placed a statue of Caesar in the temple and a pair of statues of himself and Augustus in the porch (Cass. Dio 53.27.3–4).¹⁰ The decision taken by Agrippa did not come just from the man that was personally closest to the *princeps*. It also came from someone who held a central position in Roman public religion, was a member of a number of priestly colleges, and had been playing a role of signal importance within the quindecimviral fraternity since the early Twenties.¹¹ In making a public claim about the status of Augustus vis-à-vis the gods, Agrippa—unlike Munatius Plancus—was also putting his own priestly credentials at stake.

2. MONARCHY AND PRIESTLY RECRUITMENT

As is well known, there were two fundamental centers of religious authority and expertise in Republican Rome, which both retained an important role under the Principate: the Senate and the priestly colleges. In principle, the extent of the Senate's responsibility for the running of public religion remained preeminent, as had been the case under the Republic (Brunt 1984: 437–39). According to Cassius Dio (51.19.7), in 30 B.C.E. a *senatus consultum* provided that Octavian be included in the prayers of the priestly colleges on behalf of the Senate and the people.¹² Yet, Senate and priestly colleges did have a considerable degree of interaction, and throughout the Republican period the membership of the senior colleges mainly consisted of individuals drawn from the senatorial order. That continued to be the case in the Augustan period. Suetonius (*Aug.* 31.3) states that the *princeps* increased the number of priests, as well as enhancing their *dignitas*. In fact, there is no evidence that he oversaw a sizeable or systemic expansion of the priestly colleges.¹³

¹⁰ On this episode see Koortbojian 2013: 133–36.

¹¹ Rüpke 2005: 1375 no. 3535 (= 2008: 956 no. 3535). Cf. Vell. Pat. 2.127.1: *complura ... sacerdotia*.

¹² See Wissowa 1912: 82; Reinhold 1988: 151; Lange 2009: 129.

¹³ See Scheid 1978: 617–22 and 2014: 537–39; Wardle 2014: 251–52. Cf. Hoffman Lewis 1955: 12. Changes to the membership of individual colleges did occur, although it is unclear whether they lasted in the long term: *CIL* 6.32323 shows that in 17 B.C.E. there were twenty-one *quindecimviri s.f.* (see Syme 1986: 47–49).

The prosopographical evidence for the accession to priesthoods shows a considerable degree of competition, as well as an important level of continuity. A large number of young senators did not attain the membership of a priestly college, and some posts retained a hereditary bias: members of certain families are found holding the same priestly office generation after generation. J. Scheid identifies two factors in this connection. On the one hand, there is a matter of clout. Asserting the connection of a family with a priestly college was a way of recognizing the distinction of that family and of singling out the priesthood as a worthy mark of distinction on which it was important to stake a claim. On the other hand, a more substantive issue may be invoked. Having successive members of the same family on a college over the space of several generations enabled the preservation of a “spécialisation’ sacrée” of a range of expert knowledge that is closely related to the specific remit of the college. Scheid chooses a specific analogy that encompasses both levels: “comme les célèbres *Colleges* d’Eton ou d’Oxford, les fonctions citées n’étaient une pépinière de grands hommes d’Etat que parce qu’elles se recrutaient—à des rares exceptions près—dans les milieux qui pouvaient prétendre aux carrières brillantes” (1978: 645). It is not just about perpetuating social status, therefore; it is also about certain ways of operating that are transmitted within the same families, and in turn preserve the identity of the institution in which they are deployed.¹⁴

It is worth exploring the evidence for instances in which the role of expert knowledge informed the activity of the priestly colleges. On some readings, there is an intrinsic paradox, or a layer of tension: if the emperor has full control over any major aspect of religious life, then it becomes somewhat problematic to establish what genuinely independent role priestly expertise may play in that context. Attention must be turned to specific instances. As will become apparent in what follows, some of the most instructive case studies are about the interaction between priests and Senate.

A significant, related issue must be addressed in this connection. There are occasional references in the literary evidence to a strong link between the holding of a priesthood and one’s family background. In some cases that could be regarded as a source of tensions, and not just an established, unproblematic feature of public life in the imperial period; in others it could forebode imminent traumatic developments. When the two Iunii Blaesi fell from grace with Tiberius, the *princeps* assigned to others the priesthoods that had been marked out for them when their father was in favor (Tac. *Ann.* 6.40). It was an unequivocal sign of irrevocable hostility, and the Blaesi reacted to

¹⁴ On priestly colleges as “Kommunikationszirkel innerhalb der politischen Elite,” cf. Rüpke 2005: 1602 (= 2008: 57) and 2011b: 206 (= 2014: 234).

it in the only possible way: by taking their own lives. Imperial patronage was not the only source that could lead to a priesthood, although a priestly office could not be achieved or maintained without the consent of the emperor. In sketching a brief overview of the character of Vitellius and his achievements, right after the account of his death, Tacitus (*Hist.* 3.86) points out that he owed both his consulship and his priesthoods to his father and his prestige. This pattern has, at least on some readings, deep roots. The view that there was often a link between the tenure of a priesthood and political patronage was already expressed in the late Republican period. According to Sallust (*Cat.* 21.2), Catiline promises his supporters “fresh accounts and the proscription of the wealthy; magistracies and priesthoods; and seizures and everything else which is yielded by war and by the victors’ whim and lust” (trans. Woodman 2007); in the *Bellum Jugurthinum*, the tribune Memmius denounces to his audience the fact that the *nobiles* are shamelessly displaying before the eyes of the plebs their consulships, their priesthoods, and their triumphs (Sall. *Jug.* 31.10).

Whether these statements were actually aired by the historical figures to which they are attributed is immaterial: what is significant is that Sallust regarded these views as sufficiently relevant to be voiced in an historical account of the late Republican period. A century later, Seneca (*De ira* 3.31.2) gave an example of how magistracies and priesthoods may be seen as virtually interchangeable tokens of public recognition in a certain elite mindset. He ironically depicts the thoughts of a fictional (but perfectly plausible) character who is never quite pleased with the honors that he has attained: first, he regrets not having been coopted on a priestly college after his election to the consulship, and later, having obtained the priestly status, bemoans not having been admitted to more than one college. This snapshot should not be read as evidence that priesthoods are devoid of any meaningful content, that they are under the full control of the emperor, or that they are mere instruments of power or shallow self-representation. It does identify them, though, as important features of a complex economy of honors, which in turn had direct bearings on the map of influence and power across the Roman elite. As J. Rüpke has pointed out, the cooptation into a priestly college could also be a way for sectors of the elite to recommend an individual to the attention of the emperor, and not just a function of imperial patronage.¹⁵

¹⁵ Rüpke 2005: 1594–98, 1607 (= 2008: 60) and 2011b: 210 (= 2014: 239–40). On the continuing involvement of the *comitia* in the ratification of priestly appointments, see Hoffman Lewis 1955: 15–16 (useful overview of the evidence); Gordon 1990b: 220; Rüpke 2005: 1597. Schumacher 1978: 664 argues that priests were elected by the Senate (accepted by Várhelyi 2010: 52).

Moreover, the remarks voiced by Sallust in the *Bellum Catilinae* appear to find a direct allusion right at the outset of Tacitus's *Histories* (1.2.5–6), where the author singles out the role of informers as a distinctive trait of the period to which he will be devoting his work. He also points out that some *delatores* were rewarded with priesthoods and consulships, while others obtained procuratorial posts or less visible, but nonetheless considerable places of influence within the court.¹⁶ J. Davies has singled out that statement as the clearest symptom of Tacitus's intention to depict a comprehensive crisis of religious expertise under the Principate, which becomes fully apparent after 69 C.E. Yet, as Davies himself concedes, there is no comparable assessment in the *Annales*, and arguably the picture is in fact more differentiated for the period covered in that work (2004: 185). Tacitus's comment, however, points to a further level of complexity: the priestly appointments of the Flavian period included Tacitus himself, who was appointed among the *quindecimviri s. f.* around 88 C.E., at a relatively early stage in his career.¹⁷

3. THE *PRINCEPS* AND RELIGIOUS INNOVATION

Of course, under the Principate the membership of a priestly college often was a symptom of one's proximity to the ruler. The neatest codification of this principle may be found in a letter of Pliny the Younger. As he replies to the letter of congratulations that his friend Arrianus Maturus has sent him after his appointment to the augurate, Pliny (*Ep.* 4.8) gives a list of the reasons that make that distinction worthwhile. At the forefront he places the argument that earning the appreciation of a considerate ruler like Trajan, "even in the more trivial matters" (*in minoribus etiam rebus*), is a fine thing.¹⁸ Such proximity is not immune from potential shortcomings. Concerns over the impact of the

¹⁶ Cf. also *Hist.* 1.77.5, where Otho bestows priesthoods on his associates and revives time-honored ones in order to bestow them on the young descendants of those who had held them in the past. The practice of granting priesthoods on political grounds was not unprecedented: the three accusers of Piso were duly rewarded with priesthoods (*Ann.* 3.19.1). Cf. also Tiberius's opposition to the grant of a priesthood to the Blaesi in *Ann.* 6.40 (on which see *supra*).

¹⁷ Rüpke 2005: 928 no. 1392 (= 2008: 646 no. 1392).

¹⁸ Cf. also his letter to Trajan on his ambition to hold a priesthood in 10.13. See Gibson and Morello 2012: 89–91 for a detailed reading of 4.8 and the references to Cicero and his augurate that it contains; Sherwin-White 1966: 272–73 remains valuable. Várhelyi 2010: 58 understands this passage differently: "it is a fine thing to follow the view of the venerable *princeps* even in smaller matters." I find the translation of Zehnacker and Méthy in the 2011 CUF edition preferable: "c'est un honneur d'obtenir l'estime d'un si digne prince, même dans des domaines de faible importance" (8). On the expression *iudicia principis*, cf. Sherwin-White 1966: 272.

princeps on religious and ritual practice are apparent in an anecdote retold by Suetonius (*Tib.* 25.8). In the early weeks of his rule, in September 14 C.E., Tiberius was highly suspicious of the initiatives of M. Scribonius Drusus Libo, and feared that an attack on his life might come from within the pontifical college. He therefore ordered that the *secespitae*, the knives with which sacrifices were carried out, be replaced with lead blades.¹⁹ It is unclear whether the measure was taken openly, or whether the blades were replaced without any warning. If there were reservations, these are not recorded, and Suetonius does not make clear whether the measure was intended as provisional, or when it was reversed. Moreover, the episode reported by Suetonius belongs within the wider tradition on the clash between Tiberius and Libo and on the attempt that the latter allegedly led to put an end to Tiberius's rule, on which both Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.27.2) and Cassius Dio (57.15.4) shed light, albeit without reporting the anecdote on the *secespitae*.²⁰

The implication of the story, at any rate, is abundantly clear: Tiberius does not hesitate to tamper with time-honored ritual equipment in order to quell his own fears, and he has the power to do so.²¹ We are a far cry from the subtle, if ruthless handling of pontifical *sacra* of which Augustus proved capable during his time in power. He waited until the death of Lepidus, in 13 B.C.E., to take up the office of *pontifex maximus* on 6 March 12 B.C.E., even though his former ally had been confined to Circeii for decades, and he had been in control of the college for years.²² G. Bowersock has proposed to see in that junction the moment in which Augustus codified the fullest version of his narrative of universal conquest and reconciliation: as he took up the highest pontificate, he also laid out the great sundial in the Campus Martius and planned the *Ara Pacis*. The frieze of the south wall of the altar depicts a procession of the imperial family on the day when Augustus took up the priesthood.²³ That argument carries considerable weight even if one were not to accept the reconstruction of the sundial of the Campus Martius put

¹⁹ On this tool see Siebert 1999: 249–50 no. 56. Van Haepelen 2002: 422–23 stresses the significance of this episode as evidence for the emperor's involvement in public sacrifices.

²⁰ See Pettinger 2012: 195–207; cf. 195n1 on the identification of Suetonius's L. Scribonius Libo with his brother M. Scribonius Drusus Libo, for which see also Rüpke 2005: 1268–69 no. 2999 (= 2008: 881 no. 2999) and Tobalina Oraá 2014: 189–90.

²¹ For an instance of apparently orderly interaction between Tiberius and the pontiffs, cf. Cass. Dio 57.10.1 (on the dedication of statues and shrines in honor of *Diuus Augustus*), with the remarks of Van Haepelen 2002: 397 on the legal implications of that act.

²² The choice of a date in March is likely to be a deliberate reference to the Ides of March and to the link with Caesar (Simpson 2007).

²³ Bowersock 1990, esp. 390–92. See also Scheid 1999: 58–62.

forward by E. Buchner on which Bowersock heavily relies. After taking up the priesthood, Augustus made emphatic use of the title *pontifex maximus*, but the operation that he carried out in the *Res Gestae* (10.2) was even more significant. On the one hand, he made much of the restraint that he had shown in letting Lepidus retain his priesthood, while casting doubts on its very legitimacy.²⁴ On the other, he stressed that his rise to the highest pontificate was not just a matter that brought order in the *sacra* of the city of Rome: it afforded the whole of Italy the chance to stress its gratitude and admiration for the *princeps*. The scale of the crowd that gathered in Rome to take part in the election was, in his account, unprecedented; one is reminded of the *frequentia totius Italiae* of which Cicero (*Verr.* 1.18) speaks as he depicts the census operations in 70 B.C.E.²⁵ Far from being an office that may be lightly tampered with, or merely disregarded, the highest pontificate is a central feature in the settlement devised by Augustus, or at least in the discourse that he developed around and about it. J. Scheid has shown the complexity of the arrangements that the *princeps* appears to have made between 28 and 12 B.C.E. in order to secure the viability of a number of features of Roman public religion without having to involve the *pontifex maximus*.²⁶ It is also a matter of rhetoric, or indeed of spin, though; contemporaries and, more generally, ancient students of the period were well aware of that. Imperial control over the actions of a college could be exercised in remarkably subtle forms. Cassius Dio (48.44.2–3) notes the religious scruples that Octavian manifested in 39 B.C.E. as he was about to marry Livia, who was then pregnant: he consulted the pontiffs on the propriety of the timing of the envisaged marriage. The pontiffs purportedly looked the problem up in the records of the college and argued that there was no evidence for a prohibition. Dio wryly notes that they would have claimed that even if they had been able to find evidence to that effect. He does not even need to probe the matter any further: the episode is sufficient for him to depict a certain picture of the climate.²⁷

A subtler attitude to public religion on the part of Tiberius is suggested elsewhere in the tradition. In the first book of Tacitus's *Annales* the *princeps* vetoes the consultation of the Sibylline Books after the flood of the Tiber in

²⁴ Ridley 2005: 291, 299–300 stresses the tendentiousness of this account.

²⁵ See Luke 2014: 235–41.

²⁶ Scheid 2005: 187–92. Cf. also Ridley 2005: 294–300.

²⁷ Van Haepelen 2002: 335–36 rightly notes that the response given by the pontiffs is in keeping with the tradition of the *sententiae* produced by the college in a fundamental respect: it provides two alternative scenarios and frames two clear prescriptions around them. On Tacitus's depiction of the character of Tiberius and his communication strategy, see Schulz 2015: 164–65.

15 C.E.; Tacitus points out that the *princeps* has a strong preference for secrecy on matters earthly and divine (*perinde diuina humanaque obtegens*, “concealing divine and human things alike,” *Ann.* 1.76.1). The decision did not just break with recent practice after similar occurrences. It also ran against the view of C. Asinius Gallus, who is known from an epigraphical source (*ILS* 5050) to have been a member of the quindecimviral college.²⁸ The authoritative opinion of a priest is therefore overridden. That point, however, is not voiced by Tacitus, who makes a general remark about Tiberius’s approach to government.²⁹ Equally unnoticed goes the circumstance that Tiberius himself was almost certainly a *XVuir*, and could make a reasonable claim to have a degree of specialized expertise in the matter.³⁰ This is not the only instance in which an omission of that sort may be found in Tacitus’s narrative. Taken as a whole, his evidence for priestly matters is deeply selective and at times frustrating; yet, when that account comes to an end, no other literary source gives a comparable range of information and insights. The state of the literary tradition dictates the periodization of a treatment of this topic, including that of the present discussion.³¹

4. PRECEDENTS AND DISCONTINUITY: THE CASE OF THE *FLAMEN DIALIS*

Let us now move to another aspect of the settlement of priestly matters carried out by Augustus, which also went on to have significant implications well after the end of his rule. At the end of book 54 of Cassius Dio (54.36.1), the decision to fill the position of the *flamen Dialis* on the pontifical college, nearly

²⁸ Asinius memorably invited Tiberius to define his place in the *res publica* during the Senate debate that took place a few days after the death of Augustus: see *Ann.* 1.11–12, with the excellent analysis of Schulz 2015: 161–69.

²⁹ See Goodyear 1981: 171 and Davies 2004: 189–90, where Tiberius’s hostility to Asinius Gallus is also invoked as a motive of his decision. Montero 2012: 302–7 proposes to view this episode as an instance of the opposition between “pensamiento científico o racional y la interpretación religiosa” (302): that seems unlikely.

³⁰ There is solid evidence for his membership of the college only as late as in 27 C.E., but it is likely that he joined it much sooner than that: Rüpke 2005: 886, no. 1215 (= 2008: 617, no. 1215).

³¹ Cf. Beard 1989: 46 on the limits of the evidence for priestly activity and structures in the early Principate; the present paper is based on the assumption that a discussion of the developments in this period may be attempted even if a “full documentation of priestly myths and priestly activity” for this period does not survive. On the development of priesthoods from the mid-third century C.E., see Rüpke 2005: 1607–15 (= 2008: 60–66) and 2011b: 211–18 (= 2014: 240–48).

three quarters of a century since the death of L. Cornelius Merula in 87 B.C.E., receives a rather cursory discussion, although it is—perhaps significantly—related immediately before the decision to entrust the preservation of the decrees from the tribunes and aediles to the quaestors. The decision to bring order in an aspect of the upkeep of public records is broadly comparable to that of restoring a major priestly college to its full membership. That, in turn, belongs within the exceptional extent of the powers of the *princeps*, which do affect the remit of priesthoods. Cassius Dio (51.20.3) states that Augustus obtained the power to put forward (προαιρεῖσθαι) as many additional members of the priestly colleges as he pleased.³² That prerogative did not amount to the power of appointing whatever individuals he pleased on the priestly college, but to carry out the *nominatio* of his preferred candidates. The unsatisfactory state of the evidence for how priests were recruited in this period is further compounded by our ignorance of what procedure Augustus resorted to in order to secure the appointment of the *flamen* of Jupiter during Lepidus's lifetime, while the *pontifex maximus* was not in the city of Rome.³³ Many of these shortcomings are a result of the historiographical choices of Tacitus, who concentrates on the interaction between emperor and Senate, rather than on assessing the validity and viability of specific religious institutions.³⁴

There are several instances in which this general working principle is apparent. The likeliest explanation for the choice of leaving the flamine of Jupiter vacant for three quarters of a century was that the set of duties and limitations entailed by the priesthood was hardly compatible with the demands of a mainstream political career. Even in the heavily disrupted climate of the late Republican period there would have been windows of opportunity for filling that vacancy, had some consensus within the elite and a suitable field of willing candidates existed.³⁵ In 22 C.E. the *flamen* chosen by Augustus several

³² Cf. RG 10.1 on the *saliare carmen*. On this passage see Scheid 2014: 538; in general on imperial *nominations* of priests, see Rüpke 2005: 1597–98 and Wardle 2011: 279; see also above, n15.

³³ Bowersock 1990: 393, whose proposal to reject K. Lachmann's emendation of *quinque* for *duobus* is accepted by Woodman and Martin 1996: 424. A date of 14 B.C.E. is also accepted in Rüpke 2005: 916 no. 1349 (= 2008: 638 no. 1349); *contra* cf. Scheid 1999: 60–61n49, and 2005b: 190; Van Haepelen 2002: 261; Stepper 2003: 122–23.

³⁴ Davies 2004: 179–80. Schulz 2015 offers an enlightening discussion of the complex, coded, and ultimately dysfunctional dynamics in the communication between emperors and Senate in the *Annales*.

³⁵ For a clear and persuasive illustration of this view, see Marco Simón 1996: 211–12, 219–23.

decades earlier, Ser. Cornelius Lentulus Maluginensis (*cos.* 10 C.E.), asked to be assigned the province of Asia.³⁶ On a long-held view, the *flamen* was not allowed to leave Italy: Maluginensis firmly took issue with it, and argued that the prohibition was not set out in the deliberations of the people or in any of the books that dealt with ritual regulations. It is apparent that he based his claim on some background research, and derived from it the argument that the position of the *flamen* of Jupiter was in no way different from that of the *flamines* of Mars and Quirinus.³⁷ He also looked at another cluster of precedents: the many instances in which the pontiffs had taken care of the *sacra* without the direct involvement of the *flamen*. The discontinuing of the priesthood for the best part of the first century B.C.E. was indirect proof that the flamine of Jupiter was a priesthood like any other, that it required no specific arrangements, and that the proper functioning of public religion did not hinge on it.

The concluding part of Maluginensis's argument is an insightful commentary on the transition from the late Republic to the early Principate. His scrutiny of the antiquarian evidence on the flamine led him to a conclusion on the nature of Roman politics in the recent past, and more generally on the validity of the arguments that were brought into the political debate: the prohibitions that were set against *flamines* in the past were dictated by narrow political concerns, personal jealousy, and hostility within the pontifical college. The skeptical assessment derives from a critical evaluation of the tradition and, at the same time, from a recognition of the fundamental validity of the concerns that underpin it. Maluginensis does not deny the importance of respecting precedents: he offers his own construction of them. The new political settlement offers, in his view, the scope for the restoration of a worthy tradition. Since the pontifical college is under the control of the greatest of men, there is hope that its proceedings may be handled in better keeping with

³⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 3.58–59.2, with the commentary by Woodman and Martin 1996: 422–25 and the judicious discussion in Balbo 2008: 610–16. See also Marco Simón 1996: 105–6, 217–19 and Stepper 2003: 131–33. Dalla Rosa 2014: 143 deals with this episode within the wider pattern in which the order according to which *consulares* were assigned provincial governorships was altered, not exclusively by imperial initiative; cf. also 141n96 on the use of *sors* in this context.

³⁷ On this problem cf. Serv. *Aen.* 8.552, whose view on the prerogatives of the *flamines* is opposite to Maluginensis's (Woodman and Martin 1996: 423). See also Santangelo 2013a: 756–58. Millar 1998: 116 (= 2002: 653) emphasizes the importance of this debate in the complex engagement of emperors and Senate with Republican traditions during the Julio-Claudian period; for an exploration of this issue from a legal standpoint, cf. Buongiorno 2013 (see 224–26 for a discussion of the Maluginensis affair).

the spirit of sacral law. Far from being a threat to the status of the priestly college, in Maluginensis's assessment monarchy can enable the affirmation of sound religious expertise, and the assertion of weighty priestly authority.³⁸

This argument triggered (perhaps predictably) a lively reaction in the Senate. Tacitus singles out a relative of the *flamen*, the augur Cn. Cornelius Lentulus (*cos.* 14. B.C.E.), as the most vocal opposition to Maluginensis's view.³⁹ It is notable that the view of a prominent member of the pontifical college on the duties of the members of the college was contested by the holder of another priesthood. Regrettably, we are not told about the terms of the debate and the arguments that were used by Lentulus against the *flamen*: the very fact that the discussion took place, however, suggests that an interest in the tradition of priestly colleges was not an isolated intellectual pursuit on Lentulus's part. The upshot of the argument was to entrust the solution of the controversy to the *pontifex maximus*: a decision that may have also seemed suitable to the *flamen* that had raised the issue.⁴⁰ Intriguingly, and without explicit justification being given, Tiberius postponed his ruling on the matter, and moved on to deal with a number of embassies from provincial communities before the Senate. The subsequent illness of Julia Augusta prompted the celebration of the *Ludi Magni*, which also gave Tiberius a chance to handle a matter of sacral law in rebuking the request that had been put forward by L. Apronius (*cos. suff.* 8 B.C.E.) to let the *fetiales* preside over the *ludi*.⁴¹

The chance to return to the issue of the *flamen Dialis* occurred only after the handling of the Silanus affair, and the discussion of another religious problem, the title of the cult of Fortuna Equestris. Tiberius based his ruling on the flamine on the consideration of a precedent, as he did in reaching his decision on the involvement of the *fetiales* in the *ludi* (Tac. *Ann.* 3.71). He invoked a decree of the pontifical college that directly contradicted the argument of Maluginensis: the *pontifex maximus* had allowed the *flamen Dialis* to be absent from business for more than two days, provided he was ill. However, that could not occur more than twice during the same year, and could not happen on days on which public sacrifices were supposed to take place. That precedent, which had been upheld under Augustus, made the

³⁸ Davies 2004: 186 sees in Lentulus's argument a signal instance of sycophancy, which was bound to upset many senators, and reflects poorly on the *flamen*'s priestly credentials.

³⁹ On this individual see Rüpke 2005: 915 no. 1344 (= 2008: 637 no. 1344).

⁴⁰ Davies 2004: 186 points out that this outcome was the result of the thoughtful and worthy opposition of the Senate to an attempt to tamper with an established priestly tradition; it is important to acknowledge, however, that the emperor had a crucial role in the whole affair.

⁴¹ Tac. *Ann.* 3.64, with Buongiorno 2013: 226–27 and Santangelo 2014: 103.

tenure of a provincial governorship incompatible with the flamine. The use of comparable cases from the Republican period that could have corroborated a different decision was not admitted, and Maluginensis's claim was rejected. What is significant is that the decision of the *princeps* was taken in a priestly capacity, and on the basis of a point of religion, although it was no doubt also tinged with political considerations.⁴²

There is no evidence for Maluginensis's reaction to the refusal he met with, nor for his involvement with the work of the pontifical college after that incident. The flamine of Jupiter reappears in Tacitus's narrative (*Ann.* 4.16) when the vacancy is created by Maluginensis's death in 23 C.E. Tiberius took another opportunity to present an argument of sacral law before the Senate, setting out the procedure that would lead to the appointment, and stressing the importance of recruiting the priests among the sons born of marriages that had been celebrated by *confarreatio*: a field that was considerably narrow, since that ancient ritual had fallen into desuetude. He also drew attention to the fact that the flamine had proven unattractive to many because of the restrictions that the priesthood entailed, notably the loss of *patria potestas*.⁴³ He therefore advocated a change of the law. The matter was debated in the Senate, and the conclusion was reached to leave the status of the *flamen* unchanged, while the legal position of the *flaminica* was revisited and assimilated, through a *lex rogata*, to that of all other women. Maluginensis's son was then elected to replace his father.

This episode has attracted interest from legal historians. Gaius (*Inst.* 1.136) mentions a *senatus consultum* passed in 11 B.C.E., whereby the same principle accepted in 24 C.E. appears to have been already recognized. It is therefore unclear in what relation the decree of the Senate and the law proposed by Tiberius stand with one another, and what the reasons that led Tiberius to choose a different legal framework may have been. It is apparent that he sought a different source of legitimization on this point of religion from that of the Senate. At any rate, the debate on which legal framework was to be used took place within the Senate, and was solved by a deliberation of the Senate itself.⁴⁴

⁴² Balbo 2008: 615 stresses the care with which Tiberius's argument is hedged. Van Haepelen 2002: 195 points out that there is no evidence that Tiberius resorted to the advice of the pontifical college before reaching his decision; for a different view, cf. Musial 2014: 104.

⁴³ On this point cf. Marco Simón 1996: 219–23, who rightly contrasts the flamine of Jupiter with the augurate and the pontificate.

⁴⁴ Peppe 2012: 653. On senatorial involvement in religious matters during the Julio-Claudian period, cf. Buongiorno 2016: 247–54, who stresses the extent of imperial concerns over private divination.

The detail of the solution that was reached is even more significant. The status of the *flamen* was not altered, while that of the *flaminica* was changed, although she remained subordinate to the *flamen* on religious matters. As J. Scheid has convincingly argued, the outcome that was devised in 24 C.E. reflected a wider pattern in Roman legislative production on religious and priestly matters: the specific features of the religious domain—notably, in this case, the duties of the *flamen*—were left unaltered, while a problem concerning the setup of the priesthood was effectively addressed (Scheid 2012: 27).⁴⁵

5. EMPERORS AND PRIESTLY COLLEGES

The *princeps*'s willingness to present reasonably complex arguments to support his claims on religious matters must not overshadow the fact that his position was a dominant one, and that his direct involvement with the working of the priestly colleges was a facet of that dominant status. In 23 B.C.E., the same year when the changes to the flaminiate were introduced, the pontifical college posed an urgent political problem by including young Nero and Drusus in the prayers for the health of the emperor. The subsequent developments prove that the *pontifex maximus* had not been involved with that choice.⁴⁶ Tiberius summoned the college and put to its members a question that had nothing to do with religious matters. He asked them whether they had been persuaded to do so by Agrippina, and they denied the allegation. Tiberius's reaction involved two steps: he chose not to confront the pontiffs directly and gave them a light warning (*modice perstricti*). As Tacitus (*Ann.* 4.17) points out, the college consisted mainly of relatives (*propinqui*) of his or of men of considerable standing (*primores ciuitatis*), and the *princeps* surely concluded that it was not expedient to antagonize them explicitly, although it is a safe guess that his displeasure was effectively conveyed. He was keen, however, to confront the problem more directly in a different venue, and to address it in light of its important political implications. He therefore came back to it in the Senate, pointing out that no one would be allowed to give young people honors on the scale that had been proposed. It is doubtful that the Senate was addressed as a center of religious authority in that case.⁴⁷ It is likelier that the emperor chose to discuss the political implications of the decisions of the pontiffs on a matter of ritual in a venue where they could be voiced and debated more effectively, if not more openly. The Senate was informed of the view taken by the *pontifex maximus* on a matter that fell chiefly within the remit of the pontifical college.

⁴⁵ See also Balbo 2008: 616–17 and Buongiorno 2016: 247–50.

⁴⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 4.17. On this ritual see Van Haepren 2002: 409–10.

⁴⁷ Cf. Várhely 2010: 51–52.

Another imperial intervention in a pontifical capacity is worth discussing in this connection. In 83 and 90 C.E. Domitian led prosecutions on *incestum* charges against several Vestal Virgins as *pontifex maximus*, since that is the priest to whom the supervision of the Vestals was entrusted.⁴⁸ We are informed about Domitian's actions by hostile sources, as is so often the case with that emperor, but even through the negative bias it is possible to see traces of the *princeps's* claim to priestly competence and scrupulousness. Suetonius (*Dom.* 8.4) points out that the prosecutions of 83 C.E. belonged within a wider context of greater attention to moral standards, since Domitian's immediate predecessors had overlooked similar allegations of unchastity.⁴⁹

Domitian imposed two different methods of execution over time, thereby suggesting that he had reflected upon the most appropriate way of apportioning punishment. According to Cassius Dio (67.3.4), in 83 he made a point of avoiding the ritual burial of the Vestals that were found guilty and allowed them to choose the manner of their death. In doing so, he stressed the novelty of that decision. In 90, when he was presented with a similar case, he chose to resort to the traditional form of punishment. The fullest account of the affair is provided by Pliny the Younger, who acknowledges that Domitian did act in his pontifical capacity, but readily adds that he conducted himself "with the monstrosity of a tyrant and the licence of a master" (*immanitate tyranni licentia domini*, *Ep.* 4.11.6–9).⁵⁰ Even Pliny, though, concedes that the matter was not handled in isolation by the *princeps*, but mentions a meeting of the pontifical college, in which Domitian gave his ruling on the case of Cornelia, the *Vestalis maxima*, and instructed some pontiffs to oversee her execution. In Pliny's version, the standing of the pontifical college is put under enormous strain. The priests are summoned to the villa of the emperor at Alba, where he often resided, and they do not appear to have any role in shaping Domitian's decision.⁵¹ Details are lacking, and one can only speculate on the extent of the tacit opposition within the college to the prosecutions and their outcomes. Cassius Dio reports the reaction of a pontiff, L. Helvius Agrippa, to the harsh interrogations that were carried out in the Senate in 83:⁵² he

⁴⁸ See Van Haepere 2002: 104–5; Stepper 2003: 148–53. Cf. also Gordon 1990b: 223n64. On the position of the Vestales within the pontifical college, see Van Haepere 2002: 96–106.

⁴⁹ On this episode see the insightful discussion in Gallia 2012: 109–10.

⁵⁰ See Sherwin-White 1966: 282–85. For a full-scale reconsideration of this affair, see Gallia 2012: 112–20, 125–26.

⁵¹ Pliny's emphasis on the venue of the meeting is rather tendentious: Stepper 2003: 151n257. On the secretiveness of the trial see Gallia 2012: 112–17.

⁵² Rüpke 2005: 1028 no. 1882 (= 2008: 714 no. 1882).

found them so upsetting that he collapsed and died during the proceedings. Whether this incident should be regarded as a reliable symptom of dissent is at the very least doubtful.⁵³ Moments before her execution, the Vestal Cornelia denounced a crucial flaw of the case against her: although she had been found guilty of *incestum*, Domitian had conquered and triumphed after she had performed the rituals that she was entrusted with. The argument appears to have persuaded Pliny, and no doubt convinced others.⁵⁴ At any rate, in these impressive, if poorly attested, instances the expertise of the pontifical college appears to have played a negligible role. What is not negligible is that Domitian chose to involve the college at all in the handling of the matter—admittedly not to seek its opinion about how to address it, but to stress that the required ritual action involved the presence of the *pontifices*. Far from being a merely formal tribute to a long-defunct tradition, that course of action had the aim of establishing the credibility and expertise of Domitian as a *pontifex maximus* who took a keen interest in *ius diuinum*.

6. PUBLIC DIVINATION

In a climate in which the political supremacy of the *princeps* appears indisputable it is easy to lose sight of the complexity that underpinned many aspects of Roman public religion. As pointed out above, Tacitus is not interested in producing a comprehensive account of the operations of *cultus publicus*, although he can produce detailed and insightful accounts of specific episodes if he chooses to focus on them. His attitude to the role of public prodigies is especially significant. They are predominantly absent from the narrative, and this is of course a function of Tacitus's dissatisfaction with the annalistic framework. Moreover, J. Davies has argued that this absence is a choice that is linked to Tacitus's attempt to depict a general crisis of Roman religion, in which the demise of a robust system of prodigy reports alters fundamentally the relationship between the city and the gods (2004: 194). Yet, prodigy reports do suddenly resurface in the narrative, and prompt appropriate priestly interventions: most spectacularly in 64 C.E., when disturbing prodigies are brought to the attention of the Roman authorities, and the birth of a calf with the head grown to a leg near Placentia was entrusted to the expertise of the *haruspices*, who foretold that a new head was being prepared for the world, and

⁵³ Cf. Stepper 2003: 152.

⁵⁴ Plin. *Ep.* 4.11.7: *me Caesar incestam putat, qua sacra faciente uicit, triumphauit!* ("Caesar thinks I am unchaste, although he conquered and triumphed when I performed the rites"). Cf. Gallia 2012: 124, who reads in this utterance the hint of a frustrated expectation for a saving divine intervention.

“it would be neither strong nor secret” (*Ann.* 15.47.3: *non fore ualidum neque occultum*). It was too elegant a prediction of what was to follow in the months to come not to be included within the fabric of Tacitus’s narrative. This is an almost isolated instance, although there is an intensification of portents as the age of Nero draws to a close. The correct interpretation of the signs, however, is lacking, and is a distinctive feature of a period of profound disruption. Yet, pointing to the occurrence of such events is part of the historian’s brief, because they retain their interpretative significance (Davies 2004: 206, 223).

Haruspical lore also proves invaluable, when correctly applied, during the brief rule of Galba. As the emperor is performing a sacrifice before the temple of Apollo, the haruspex Umbricius inspects the entrails of the victim and sees signs of an imminent plot and of the presence of an enemy. Indeed, Otho is standing right next to Galba, and views the incident as a favorable sign for himself (*Tac. Hist.* 1.27.1). That a prophecy may derive from an exercise in extispicy is a brief return to Republican practice. What is remarkable is that an individual haruspex is singled out by name, while haruspices are usually mentioned as a nameless corporate group. Umbricius must have been a man of considerable political and social significance: an inscription from Tarentum mentions him as a patron of the *municipium* and records the title of *haruspex Caesarum*.⁵⁵ His prophecy, however, is an isolated instance. When a new political settlement is reached, after Vespasian’s victory, the haruspices resume their role of advisors on matters of ritual in directing the inauguration of the Capitol after the fire of 69 C.E., and stay clear from prophetic statements.⁵⁶

The overall problem that we have identified emerges with even greater clarity if we turn to another aspect of public divination. The controversy on the Sibylline Books in 32 C.E. offers another instance of the enduring significance of priestly expertise, and of the heavy pressures it was under.⁵⁷ A tribune of the plebs, Ser. Nonius Quinctilianus, proposes to the Senate to allow the introduction of a new book into the Sibylline corpus. The initiator of the proposal is in fact a member of the college, L. Caninius Gallus, but there is no mention of an endorsement of the quindecimviral board as a whole. Regrettably, the background of the proposal is elusive; the reaction of the Senate, which passed a decree in its support, suggests that it had influential backers. It is stalled, however, by an intervention of the *princeps*, this time from far afield, and by letter. As is the case in the dispute with the pontiffs, a level of double-speak is noticeable. Tiberius criticizes with some

⁵⁵ *AE* 1930, 52. See Rüpke 2005: 1335; Davies 2004: 187–88; Briquel 2014: 145.

⁵⁶ *Tac. Hist.* 4.53. See Santangelo 2013b: 271–72; Woolf 2013: 139–43.

⁵⁷ *Tac. Ann.* 6.12. See Stepper 2003: 135–36.

restraint (*modice tribunum increpans*—the same adverb that Tacitus uses to refer to the tone of Tiberius's conversation with the pontiffs in *Ann.* 4.17)⁵⁸ the conduct of the tribune, who had agreed to get involved in a matter of public religion because of his youth and inexperience. However, the *princeps* is more scathing about the conduct of Caninius, who brought the matter before the Senate on a session that also happened to witness a very low turnout. Unlike Quintilianus, Caninius has a solid and long-standing expertise on religious matters, and chose an illegitimate course of action by deciding not to consult the quindecimviral college.

Tiberius, therefore, constructs his role as that of the champion of the authority of the priestly college and of respect for its traditional role, against the competing pressures of a fraudulent individual and of a Senate that did not rise to the importance of its task. He then reminds his audience of the correct practice in such matters, which involves the consultation of the *magistri* of the college, and compounds his argument with some references to the history of the Sibylline Books, notably to the process that led to the reconstitution of the corpus after the fire on the Capitol in 83 B.C.E.⁵⁹ As Zs. Várhely has noted, this episode and Tiberius's emphasis on the significance of the quindecimviral college are instances of attention to, and tensions about, access to religious knowledge (2010: 161).⁶⁰ They should not be read, however, as a development of the early Principate, but as the evolution of debates that were already unfolding in the Republican period, and which the *princeps* keenly exploits for the sake of his own agenda. It is worth pointing out that Tacitus is likely to have had access to specific information on this topic: he was a member of the quindecimviral college. Regrettably, his expert knowledge hardly emerges at all in the surviving sections of his work, although it is a safe guess that it did feature in part of what went lost: there certainly was a discussion of the rationale presiding over the system of *saecula* and the *ludi Saeculares* in the section of the *Historiae* devoted to the rule of Domitian, to which he cursorily alludes in the account of the *ludi* of Claudius in *Annales* 11.11.1.⁶¹

⁵⁸ *Modice* is also used in *Ann.* 4.40.1 with reference to Tiberius; and cf. *immodice* on C. Silius in 4.18, a few lines after the account of Tiberius's conversation with the pontiffs.

⁵⁹ The names of the *magistri* do not survive: in 17 B.C.E., the chronologically closest instance in which they are preserved, there are known to have been five, including Augustus (Rüpke 2005: 152 = 2008: 142). It is likely that Tiberius held the same position within the college.

⁶⁰ See also Potter 1994: 150–51.

⁶¹ Davies 2004: 211–21 discusses the reasons that led Tacitus not to identify the *saecula* as a central theme of his narrative.

It would be far-fetched to regard the Caninius incident as an instance in which competing sources of religious authority are facing each other. When the emperor chooses to get involved in the matter, a letter is sufficient to determine an outcome that meets his wishes.⁶² On the other hand, it is important to recognize that the solution that was devised was not one of outright rejection of Caninius's proposal: the text was not discarded without discussion, but was submitted to the scrutiny of the quindecimviral college. In a recent discussion, this episode has been viewed as an instance of the "corporate capacity of religious resistance" that the Senate was still able to deploy in the early Principate (Várhelyi 2010: 53).⁶³ It is, to be sure, an instance of the enduring relevance that the Senate could have in shaping and debating religious matters. Tiberius's intervention is an instance of a reactive use of the power of the *princeps*. It is intended to redress a situation with which he was displeased, and is shrewdly presented as a defence of the prerogatives of the quindecimviral college and of its traditional lore. The arrangement that precedes the intervention of Tiberius is more interesting and instructive. It is the outcome of a process in which a tribune, an individual member of a priestly college and the Senate cooperate to bring about an innovation on an important ritual matter. Its failure in 24 C.E. does not rule out that similar attempts were made and were indeed successful in other phases of imperial history.

The procedure chosen by Caninius is surprising at first glance, because it is not paralleled anywhere in the surviving evidence. It is yet another reminder of the gaps in our information. Nowhere in the surviving literary evidence do we get a full account of how a priestly college, whether large or small, worked: that is why the records of a relatively minor fraternity, the *Commentarii fratrum Arvalium*, are so valuable to our understanding of Roman religion in practice. The literary tradition on the early Principate is even less informative than the sources on the Republican period. Only a few instances of the activity of the main priestly colleges receive a mention, and they tend to shed light on moments that reflect exceptional states of affairs. They also fail to convey any sense of how the colleges operated in practice. One of the main features of the political and antiquarian program on which Claudius embarked during his censorship was the revival of the college of the haruspices, which had allegedly fallen into neglect after having served the *res publica* well in directing the expiation of public prodigies. The *senatus consultum* that took heed of

⁶² On written communication within priestly colleges under the Principate, see Rüpke 2005: 1606 (cf. 2008: 60) and 2011b: 209 (= 2014: 238).

⁶³ Cf. Rüpke 2005: 1602 (= 2008: 57) on the role that priestly colleges could play in "die informelle Herstellung von Konsens unter den Senatoren."

Claudius's stated vision included instructions for the revival of haruspicy, and instructed the pontifical college on what interventions—whether along the lines of reform or restoration—were to be made (Tac. *Ann.* 11.15.3). It is quite clear that Tacitus is uninterested in the details of the matter. There is no information on the unfolding of the process or on the debate that led to the final deliberation. As is the case in various moments of Republican history, the pontifical college just follows up on whatever guidance the Senate may give; S. Malloch plausibly suggests that the recommendations that the pontiffs subsequently devised were to be reported to the Senate, rather than being implemented directly.⁶⁴ The pontifical college receives another cursory mention in the following book (12.8.2), when Claudius instructs it to carry out some expiatory rituals at the grove of Diana after the suicide of Silanus. It is likely that these instructions were conveyed by the *princeps* in his capacity as *pontifex maximus*. Again, Tacitus does not expand on the terms of the ritual; he just points out that the prospect of devising penalties for incest was widely regarded as ludicrous (*inridentibus cunctis*). The ridicule with which this ritual met, however, does not reflect as much on the pontiffs as it does on the emperor who gave instructions to carry it out.⁶⁵ It also shows, of course, that there was a widely held horizon of expectations on how pontiffs were supposed to conduct themselves. Irony or sarcasm on certain forms of religious practice imply that the correct versions of them were regarded as intrinsically serious.⁶⁶

7. PRIESTLY MEMBERSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS

A further pointer to the persistent significance of priestly colleges in the early Principate comes from what is known about the hurdles, notably of a financial kind, that could be placed before those who aspired to their membership. The most revealing piece of evidence refers to an exceptional period in the history of the early Principate, notably the rule of Gaius Caesar, in which the relationship between the *princeps*, the senatorial elite, and the rest of the empire was put under unprecedented strain. Cassius Dio (59.28.5) reports an episode within a wider account of the extravagant behavior of Gaius Caesar and his despotic attitude. The emperor tampered with the topography of the temple of Castor and Pollux so that he could claim to have the Dioscuri as

⁶⁴ Malloch 2013: 238. Some scholars have argued that Tacitus' passage does not refer to the creation of the *ordo LX haruspicum*, since it speaks of a *collegium*: Buongiorno 2013: 240n55 accepts that view and lists some relevant bibliography.

⁶⁵ Cf. Davies 2004: 187.

⁶⁶ Cf. Parker 2012: 470 on sarcasm about seers in societies that rely on divination.

his gatekeepers; he then created a cult of Jupiter Latiaris that was in fact his direct personification, and for which he recruited priests among the wealthy (τοὺς πλουσιωτάτους), including his wife Caesonia and his uncle Claudius. Each priest was required to pay ten million sesterces in exchange for the priesthood. Suetonius (*Claud.* 9.2) records a lower sum (eight million), and is more specific on the impact that such huge expenditure had for Claudius: he had to mortgage his estate in order to meet the financial obligation under which he was bound. That is hardly surprising, since the sum was ten times higher than the minimum senatorial census. The case of Claudius reflects a situation that was hardly typical, and the extent of the requirement must have been extraordinary. Moreover, there is no parallel evidence for the payment of *summae honorariae* to secure access to a priesthood in Rome, although it is well attested in municipal contexts.⁶⁷ The emphasis of the sources, however, suggests that the emperor's decision to request the payment was not remarkable in itself, and on balance it is safe to assume that it was not unprecedented.

In the case of Claudius under Gaius Caesar, the priesthood of Jupiter Latiaris is an offer that cannot be turned down, and the payment of the sum is a toll that Claudius and the other priests are to pay if they are to survive. In other cases, however, it will have probably been a price that was met far more happily. The emperor is a source of guidance and authority, who sets the spirit of his time by example: the unpalatable enthusiasm with which Velleius sets out that principle does not detract from the validity that it had in the eyes of many (Vell. Pat. 2.126). A reform mentioned by Suetonius (*Aug.* 35.1–4) in his discussion of the dealings between Augustus and the senatorial order provides a striking instance of the impact that an imperial decision could make on the day-to-day unfolding of the political process, and a further illustration of the complex interplay between political and religious levels. The *princeps* established that at the beginning of each session the senators were to make an offer of incense and wine to the altar of the god within whose temple the Senate happened to meet.⁶⁸ It was a powerful way of setting the tone. That ritual reminded the senators of the religious significance of their role and of the prerogatives of the body to which they belonged.

This episode is a valuable summary of the complexity of the Augustan resettlement. On the one hand, the introduction of a ritual that restated (and

⁶⁷ Stepper 2003: 49. As Gordon 1990b: 223 notes, the evidence for the age of Caligula is “casual.” On the economic dimension of priesthoods in the city of Rome, see Rüpke 2005: 1467, who draws attention to the lavish expenses that new members of the priestly colleges often met in order to organize the *cenae aditiales*. Municipal contexts: Hemelrijk 2015: 72–73, 97–98.

⁶⁸ See Wardle 2014: 283.

made even more relevant) the familiar point that the Senate met in a temple, practically in the presence of a god (quite apart from its important religious tasks). On the other hand, new practices were introduced on the protocol to be followed by the senators when they entered the Curia one by one, and after being searched (as Cremutius Cordus pointedly observed: *FRHist* 71 F4), and in the way in which the *princeps* ran the proceedings in his capacity as *princeps senatus*, overriding any consideration of seniority and consulting senators in the order that he pleased. This is surely a more perceptive reading of the change that Augustus introduced after the death of Agrippa as part of his *cura morum* than the account that we find in Cassius Dio (54.30.1), where the emphasis is on Augustus's intent to foster the display of piety, and on the instruction that he gave to the senators not to visit him for the morning *salutatio*. The seemingly straightforward innovation of the opening sacrifice is part of a wider role-assignment strategy that Augustus deployed towards the Senate, and which is based on a clear view on the balance of power—and status—between Senate and *princeps*.

8. CONCLUSION: THE WEIGHT OF PRIESTHOODS

The explanatory power of any model must be tested against its relevance to historical practice and its concrete applications. However, it is hard to escape the impression that the surviving literary record offers a highly incomplete view of the range of priestly duties and of the instances of priestly expertise that played a significant role in the first century of the Principate. If the epigraphic habit gives us an increasingly detailed picture of priests and priest-hoods across the Empire, the place that priesthoods had within the fabric of the *res publica* conversely becomes more elusive. On the basis of the evidence that does survive, it would be misplaced to envisage a drastic curtailment of any space of debate. There are some instances, especially in Tacitus, of lengthy discussions over technical religious matters, and it is perhaps telling that, in his wider discussion of the place that philosophy must have in the training of an orator, Quintilian mentions the debates that have frequently taken place in the Senate on augural matters, oracles, and all kinds of religious issues (*Inst.* 12.2.21: *de auguriis, responsis, religione denique omni*), and on which the orator must be able to offer informed comments. *Religio*, therefore, is part of a *comme il faut* training of a member of the senatorial order, quite apart from whatever priestly duty he might have to fulfil, and possibly quite apart from any actual impact that the debates in which he would take part might make.

Yet, on some views (which these days are more often presupposed than openly stated), priesthoods are superstructures of the political system, a

“subclass” of magistracies; in the imperial period, they are a function of one’s proximity to the ruler and the extent to which one gets to participate in the symbolic capital that monarchy entails. An instance of the most radical form of this approach may arguably be found in Syme’s *Augustan Aristocracy*, where two whole chapters are devoted to “Lentulus the Augur,” viz. Cn. Cornelius Lentulus (*cos.* 14 B.C.E.: see above, section 4), and “Piso the Pontifex,” viz. L. Calpurnius Piso (*cos.* 15 B.C.E.), without a single reference being made to what duties or opportunities their priesthoods may have entailed.⁶⁹ Their priestly titles are merely helpful to distinguish them from their namesakes. The shortcomings of such a reading are apparent. The rituals with which priests were involved are of central significance to the functioning of the community. They make them highly visible actors, and the actions that they perform are anything but shallow rituals. They are cornerstones of collective life, and must have been taken seriously by a very broad base of those who attended them.⁷⁰ The occasional bemoaning of the consequences that political patronage has on the choice of priests is precisely a symptom of the enduring significance of those offices and of the tasks that they entailed. But the approach is exceptionable even on the view of some of the surviving literary sources, even those that reflect a tangential interest in the workings of public religion, and whose selective agenda is the main reason for our partial appreciation of the place that priestly activity and expertise had in the early Principate. Piso is explicitly mentioned as *pontifex* by Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.10.2), who records his death in 32 C.E., stressing that it was due to natural causes and recording his merits as a sensible and moderating presence on the Roman political scene. The brief mention of his priestly office is surely a reference to the fact that an important part of Lentulus’s influence in the *res publica* was deployed through his involvement with the affairs of the college. However, Tacitus’s text does not provide any further detail. The same applies to M. Cocceius Nerva, formerly a close friend of the emperor, who is driven to suicide in 33 C.E. and is mentioned as an expert in “all law divine and human” (*omnis diuini humanique iuris sciens*, Tac. *Ann.* 6.26.1). Under the Principate there was a wide body of religious knowledge that was displayed and applied outside the remit of the priestly colleges, just as had been the case under the Republic.

That Roman priesthoods were closely embedded in the political domain is an unquestionable and indeed unremarkable point. Under the early Principate

⁶⁹ Syme 1986: 284–99 and 329–45 respectively. On Syme and Roman priests, see Scheid 2008: 185–86, 191–92. Cf. also the subtitle of the valuable 1955 monograph on early Imperial priesthoods by M. Hoffman Lewis (*A Study of the Nobility from 44 B.C. to 68 A.D.*).

⁷⁰ See the important remarks of Millar, ed. 2000: 67, in response to Scheid 2000.

that embeddedness became even deeper than had previously been the case. Understanding the role of Roman priesthoods in this period in terms of resistance would be as unhelpful as dismissing it under the rubric of irrelevance. The ways in which priestly authority and expertise are deployed may be revealing of a general political climate, the tensions that pervade it, and the opportunities that it presents. Priesthoods are prominent and valuable centers of religious knowledge and action even under a deeply authoritarian regime. The craft of a capable *princeps* encompasses the ability to engage meaningfully with the complexity of their lore and their political and symbolic significance, both in the performance of priestly duties and beyond. Negligence or unabashed manipulation are not viable options. The success of such engagement and the impact of priestly knowledge on political developments must be assessed first and foremost by engaging with specific historical instances. Whatever little survives of the evidence for the interaction between priests, priestly colleges, emperors, and Senate reveals a picture of striking liveliness and complexity that escapes us in a number of important respects, but should by no means be overlooked.

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